

When poor communication has grave consequences

 By [Amy Johnson](#)

25 Feb 2013

In our clamorous society, if a message reaches its intended recipient, without being altered or misconstrued during transmission, it's truly a phenomenal occurrence. When this happens in business, it is akin to the broken telephone game we played in our youth, with a noteworthy difference - we aren't spared the consequences. Instead of laughing about the garbled string of words that emerge at the end of the broken-down telephone, businesses lose millions, people lose their jobs and reputations are ruined.

In August last year, Chris Moerdyk wrote an [opinion piece](#) about the Marikana Massacre, highlighting the way mine management, police, government and even the miners themselves failed to communicate with each other. He very aptly pointed out that poor communication is the human condition, and that even bacteria trump us *Homo sapiens* in communication abilities. It's an important point to make, and one that isn't frequently considered.

Counting the cost

Companies often fail to trace a reduction in revenue or loss of clients back to poor communication, and so the real cost of this deficiency is seldom taken into account. There aren't many studies that have been conducted in this regard, but a [2010 UK report](#) by Vodafone found that, at the time of the report, unanswered business enquiries cost a company £30,000 per year. This amount has no doubt escalated over the past two years.

Although an equivalent South African study could not be sourced, the situation is presumably the same, if not worse. [HelloPeter.com](#), the largest purely customer service oriented website, reports that it receives 600,000 visits per month. Founder, Peter Cheales, points out that it is the human condition to complain rather than compliment. For [companies that respond to commentary on Hello Peter](#), 70% of all posts are complaints versus 30% of compliments. For companies that don't respond, 85% of posts are complaints versus 15% of compliments.

Silence is not a game changer

With the mounting shift towards digital business dealings, communication and PR professions are becoming increasingly important for online reputation management and customer service. There are still some companies, however, that do not value feedback and open communication policies, and this is why so many of them suffer from [poor reputation](#). FNB has made some noteworthy progress in this regard, and it's quite easy to pinpoint their improved customer communication via social media and the like as being the reason for such improved public perception. They're not shying away from tough questions, and ultimately the company is demonstrating that every individual customer experience is valued. However, FNB is an exception to the norm.

One just needs to spend a few minutes browsing through the realms of unanswered customer complaints on Hello Peter to realise that there is a gaping hole in many business' customer service plan or complete lack thereof. The one-way flow of communication is disheartening, especially given the impact that it has on public perception.

Second chances

One of the biggest mistakes that businesses make is presuming that a customer misunderstanding and a resulting complaint equate to a lost customer. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The very act of reaching out to a company is often a final show of desperation. One could compare this scenario to quarrelling lovers on the verge of a break-up; the final showdowns are a desperate attempt to be understood and to possibly save the relationship. A customer complaint is actually an opportunity - to understand, to make right and save the relationship.

Businesses need to focus less on the dissemination of messages and delve more into the intricacies of listening and understanding their audiences, consumers and contacts. Some may disregard communication skills because they're considered "soft skills" and are not perceived to affect a company's bottom line. If more businesses could attach an actual monetary figure to their communication faux pas, would this "soft skill" be so underrated?

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